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‘Pageantis & sportis & plesand pastymes’: Scottish drama until 1650

Scarcely any Scottish play-texts survive from before 1650. Yet pre-Reformation Scotland abounded with words for theatrical and quasi-theatrical performance: *pageant*, *sport* and *pastime* are joined by *play*, *game*, *farce*, *guising*, *mask*, *procession*, *clerk play*, *comedy*, *tragedy*, *ludus*, *riding*, *entres*, *dance*, *interlude*, *jape*, *ballade*, *gest*, *jousting* and *mumming*.¹ This range of terms might seem to suggest, in spite of the lack of texts, not only a rich range of performance practices but carefully distinguished dramatic genres. But in fact the terms are more fluid and slippery, much less exact than their modern equivalents might suggest.² *Play* itself might be used for anything from formal drama, to folk custom, to sports and games. Theatricality was flexible, multiple and diverse.

This rich elusiveness of the vocabulary of performance is one key to a world of theatrical activity that is very different from modern expectations. Today drama is experienced primarily as a leisure-time cultural option, most often run commercially in dedicated performance buildings. Before the Reformation, Scotland, like the other countries of Europe, had no commercial theatres or any tradition of this kind of play-going. Dramatic performance flourished, but was generally embedded in the cultural institutions and social interactions of everyday life. Drama marked and expressed the festivals of the church and religious practice, civic identity and the status of the burghs, the court’s projection of its own image nationally and internationally, and political debate and propaganda. Recent work has also shown vividly how the more informal interactions of social, political and religious life all drew on an awareness of theatricality that blurs the lines between drama, ceremonial and display. John McGavin has explored the consciously shaped public performance

used by ordinary people in early Scotland to structure their social interactions. He identifies this theatricality in, ‘episodes of assault and assassination, public petition, clerical interrogation, dissent, physical display through costume, the public performance of identity, tournament, preaching, and the varied spectatorship of tourism’.³ Even after the Reformation, Margo Todd demonstrates persuasively how habits of theatrical public self-display continued to flourish in the supposedly anti-dramatic Presbyterian church, where catechisms were publicly recited, reconciliations ritually enacted, and penitents required to be ‘made a public spectacle’.⁴ Scotland before 1650 had no theatres; but theatricality remained through most of the period a vital and important mode of social and cultural expression. It may therefore be most revealing to approach early Scottish drama through the key organising institutions of daily life: the church, the burgh and the court.

Drama and Religion

Until 1560, Scotland shared in the Roman Catholic church that dominated Western Europe throughout the middle ages. This was a church that valued ceremonial and ritual as a mode of worship and as an expression of faith. The liturgy of the church drew on spectacle, elaborate vestments, music and formal text, bells, incense and candles. Indeed, one of the fiercest complaints against the church by the Protestant Scottish Reformers of the later sixteenth century concerned what was by then perceived as its ‘theatricality’. John Knox, attacking the Mass in 1550, scorned the ‘jukings, noddings, crossings, turning, uplifting’ of the priests ‘clad in disguised garments’.⁵ Many church festivals were celebrated with spectacular ceremonial beyond the kirk building, as relics of the saints or other sacred objects were processed through the town with, as Knox again dismissively complained, ‘tabours and

trumpets, banners and bagpipes'.⁶ These vivid practices of devotion involved the townspeople, and especially the trade guilds, in often elaborate display and performance.

Some of these festivals developed practices that seem to us more fully theatrical. In various towns through Scotland in the middle ages, Candlemas (the Feast of the Purification), Pasch (Easter) and Corpus Christi were celebrated with activities which are recognisably dramatic, though not enough evidence survives to be clear exactly what they involved. Aberdeen offers us the earliest glimpse of what became established practice in many towns of Scotland. From 1442 we have records of an 'offerand of oure lady' at Candlemas which involved a procession for which the trade guilds provided performers for named roles. Some of these roles relate to Candlemas itself, which celebrated the presentation of the infant Christ at the Temple: the Littsters [dyers] supplied 'the emprioure and twa doctourez [scholars]', the Smiths and Hammermen 'the three kingis of Culane' [the Magi], the Tailors, 'oure lady' and Joseph, the Websters [weavers] Simeon.⁷ This might suggest a drama of the presentation; but other guilds were asked to find a range of characters that would hardly fit such a play: St Bride and St Helen, Moses, and 'twa or foure wodmen [wild men]', minstrels, and 'alsmony honeste squiarez [squires] as thai may'. This sounds more like a spectacular procession, presenting a range of biblical characters associated with the feast, but interspersed with other religious and popular figures in a musical cavalcade. The crafts were required in 1506 'to observe & keipe the saide processioun alss honorably as thai cane' and 'in the play pass tua & ij togidder socialie'.⁸

This model would fit many of the performances found elsewhere. Perth records a *processione et ludo corporis christi* [procession and play of Corpus Christi] from 1485, for which the Hammermen in 1518 and again in 1553 paid ‘playaris’ including Adam and Eve, their patron St Eloy, ‘the marmadin [mermaid]’, the devil and his man, St Erasmus, the king and three tormentors.⁹ It is hard to see what kind of play would include all these characters, and payment for banner-bearers may again suggest elaborate procession. The yearly Corpus Christi expenses of the Edinburgh Hammermen are almost all for torches and candles, banners and minstrels for ‘the processioun [...] quhen the sacrament yeid throw the toune’, although they too provided biblical characters, paying for ‘herod and his vj knyghtis’. ‘Play’ and ‘procession’ seem overlapping terms, as in 1494 Edinburgh payments ‘quhen the processioun was playd for the kyng’.¹⁰

Even as processions these grand events give us some sense of the religious significance of performance and its important role in devotion. The records suggest a powerful mixture of magnificence, pageantry, the emotive and the awe-inspiring. The ‘credil & thre barnis [babies] maid of clath’ (Dundee, mid fifteenth century) or the tormentors and cord drawer at the martyrdom of St Erasmus (Perth 1518) imply vivid and emotional sensation; the ‘gold fulye [foil] to Cristis pascione’ and ‘makyn of dragone’ for St George (Lanark 1507) suggest spectacular splendour; while the banners, torches and musicians all draw participants and onlookers into a passionate public enactment and celebration of their faith.¹¹

While the processions may not have involved spoken drama, it is likely that scripted plays on religious topics also developed in medieval Scotland. Aberdeen

records expenses (1440 and 1445) for *quodam ludo de ly haliblude ludendo apud ly Wyndmylhill* [‘a certain play of the holy blood, playing on the Windmill Hill’]. A few years later the notary public was paid *pro scriptura ludi in festo corporis christi* [‘for copying out a play for the feast of Corpus Christi’] which suggests a spoken text, while in 1479 the Burgh pays for ‘arayment & uthiris necessaris of the play to be plait in the fest of corpus christi’.¹² In later years we hear of ‘clerk plays’ in many towns, which appear to be spoken plays composed on religious themes presumably by clerics. Ayr and Edinburgh both record expenses for clerk plays, in Edinburgh on a ‘scaffold’, so not processional. We do not know much about this tradition of clerk plays, but it seems clear that they were popular. The ‘Gud Wife’ taught her daughter that young women should not go ‘to clerk playis na pilgrimage’ by themselves, while in 1546 the Reformer George Wishart complained that at Haddington ‘wold have bein at ane vane Clerk play two or three thowsand people’.¹³ It is certainly possible that alongside the spectacular processions clerk plays carried a tradition of fully-fledged spoken drama, entertaining but on religious topics, right through the sixteenth century and into post-Reformation Scotland.

Drama and the Town

It is already clear that religious devotion was inseparable from other aspects of social and community life in early Scotland. The processional drama of Corpus Christi and Candlemas is an especially striking instance of how theatrical performance expressed an intricate web of spiritual and secular experiences and identities.¹⁴ The drama honoured religious festivals, saints and sacraments; yet was organised by the burgh councils and performed by the trade and craft guilds. The guilds had important religious obligations, maintaining altars in the church and supporting the spiritual as

well as the physical needs of their members. Their devotion to God, the Church, and their patron saints was asserted through the processional pageants. But guilds were also defined by the skill and exercise of their craft, and their social and civic status within their city. The drama was a means of performing and asserting all these interacting and overlapping identities. The craft demonstrated its business, with guild members carrying the emblems of their trades: a recalcitrant tailor in Aberdeen in 1524 was instructed that he must ‘bring on his breist the wsit taikin [customary token] of his craft that is to say ane pair of pantit scheris [painted shears]’.¹⁵ The processions also dramatised relative social status, the most prestigious places being at the end, nearest to the sacrament. We find squabbles about precedence: Aberdeen (1507) orders that the ‘skynnaris sale gang befor the cordinaris [shoemakers]’ while Edinburgh decides (1509) that the Websters [weavers], Walkers [fullers] and Shearers should join together, though the Websters’ arms are to be most prominent on the banners.¹⁶ The right to performance in these spectacles was an important aspect of guild identity, in urban and mercantile as well as religious terms. The Edinburgh Wrights’ and Masons’ constitution insists that they shall ‘have thair placis [...] in all generale processions lyk as thai haf in the towne of Bruges or siclyk gud townes’.¹⁷

Processional drama also involved the dignity and authority of the burghs themselves: councils were determined to mount lavish, well-ordered and impressive spectacles that redounded to the credit of the city. The craftsmen were not always fully committed to the expense and effort of public pageantry and many burghs tried repeatedly to enforce guild participation by fines and other sanctions. The rhetoric of their regulations shows how the performances were understood as a key element in a town’s historic, civic, national and sacred identity. Many burghs echoed Perth’s

proclamation in 1531: ‘conforme to the auld lovabill consuetudis and ryte [loveable customs and rite] of this burgh [...] in the honour of god and the blissit virgyne Marye The craftismen of this burgh in thair best array keipe and decore the processioun ... als honorabillye as thai can Every craft with thair awin baner [...] this statute ...] to be kepit Invioablye In all maner in tyme cuming’.¹⁸ The drama of the procession asserts to citizens and beyond the civic pride and historic identity of the burgh.

Not all burgh drama was processional. Many towns established or maintained ‘playfields’, large outdoor venues such as Aberdeen’s Windmill Hill or Edinburgh’s Greenside where we know that plays were performed. The playfields demonstrate how fluid a category drama was at this period, being used equally for sports, games, and battle training. The range of uses and the role of drama itself is summarised in an Edinburgh proposal (1552) for a place for ‘pastymes meit [suitable] for deffence of the realme and toun [...] and [...] to play interludis in to draw pepill till the toun’.¹⁹ Sport and play, defence of city and realm, and theatrical entertainment all share the venue for the profit of the burgh and community.

Burghs supported various kinds of popular drama. Many towns appointed an official organiser of such festivity, who went under various names: the Abbot of Unreason, of Bonacord, or of Narent, Robin Hood and Little John. These ‘mock kings’ or ‘Lords of Misrule’ took charge of a range of dramatic and quasi-dramatic activities through the year. A 1553 statute in Aberdeen reminded the Lords of Bonacord that their role was ‘halding of the guid toun in glaidnes and blythnes with dansis, farsis, playis & gamis in tymes convenient’.²⁰ Large cities, small burghs, villages and guilds all appointed such Robin Hood-figures to organise performances.

Burgh regulations do not distinguish such activities from religious processions: this festive drama similarly promoted community identity and pleasurable civic responsibility. Aberdeen chose its Lord of Bonacord in 1522 ‘requirand & chargand all maner of abill personis till obey to the saidis lordis of bonacord’.²¹ But although the burghs rewarded the Abbots of Unreason with various kinds of payments, burgesses were not always eager to take on the responsibility. In 1518 the Earl of Arran asked the Edinburgh council to release one reluctant Little John, chosen ‘to mak sportis and jocositeis [festivities] in the toun’, explaining he was ‘a man to be usit hiear [higher] and gravar materis’.²² In Haddington the council eventually drew up a list of candidates, approaching each in turn until someone agreed to accept the role.²³ While theatrical entertainment was recognised as an important force in the community, its organisation could be a burden.

One quasi-theatrical activity organised by Robin Hoods almost everywhere was the May game of ‘bringing in summer’. This seems to have involved another costumed procession, this time from the town out into the countryside. The later sixteenth century poet Alexander Scott records how in May:

men yeid [went] everich one,
 With Robene Hoid and Littill Johne
 To bring in bowis [boughs] and birkin bobbes [birch branches].²⁴

This echoes Aberdeen’s order (1508) that all able persons in the burgh should be ‘reddy with thar arrayment maid in grene and yalow, bowis, Arrowis ... to pass with Robyne huyd & litile Iohnne’.²⁵ While this does not suggest spoken drama, an early

sixteenth century text titled ‘The Maner of the Crying of Ane Playe’ clearly seems to be a performance speech for such a May game. The speaker, a lively comedian who identifies himself as ‘Wealth’, addresses an audience of Edinburgh merchants:

Ye noble merchandis everilkane
 Addres yow furth with bow and flane [arrow]
 In lusty grene lufraze,
 And follow furth on Robyn Hude,
 With hartis coragious and gud.²⁶

In his preceding monologue Wealth tells the fantastical story of his giant ancestors, including his great-grandfather Finn McCool who:

tak the sternis doune with his hand,
 And set tham in a gold garland
 Abone his wyfis haire. (ll. 45-7)

and his great-grandmother who spat out Loch Lomond, pissed the Firth of Forth and whose farts sank ships in Norway. Wealth has now come to establish himself ‘In Edinburgh quhar is meriast cheire, / Plesans, disport and play’ (132-3). The fantastic comedy of the speech, its intimate address to its spectators, flattery of the city and lively encouragement of the inhabitants to join in dramatic games – all oddly reminiscent of a present-day Edinburgh Festival comedian – gives a vivid sense of the role of this kind of theatre in enhancing the festive identity of burgh and its citizens.

Burghs also used elaborate theatrical celebration to mark significant royal events, dramatising their national identity and relationship to the sovereign. The city itself would be turned into an elaborate stage to welcome monarchs at their accession, or royal brides, who would move through a spectacular series of pageants which received them into the realm.²⁷ Margaret Tudor arriving as bride of James IV in 1503 was led before tableaux of the Judgement of Paris and the Annunciation, before passing under an arch demonstrating the uniting of Scotland and England with images of a 'Chardon florysches [flowering thistle] and a Red Rose entrelashed'.²⁸ James VI in his royal entry as an adult king in 1579, was presented with the keys of the town by a singing boy descending in a globe from the city gate, invited to adjudicate a pageant of the judgement of Solomon, and offered an elaborate horoscope of his birth.²⁹ The whole town was decorated by the householders with tapestries, flowers and images. These entries dramatised the prosperity, glory and loyalty of the city, honouring but also defining the monarch's relationship to the nation.

Drama and the Court

The royal court of Scotland was an important patron of dramatic activity. As we have seen, court and monarch shared in the theatrical activities of church and city. Kings went to see 'the corpus christi play', were celebrated in royal entries, and gave money to Abbots of Unreason. The court even adopted and adapted popular practices for itself. James V appointed his own Robin Hood, supplied with livery, banner and attendants.³⁰ A sophisticated polyphonic choral composition survives, probably from around 1500, that seems to enshrine and refine for the court the text of a folk drama, a 'Plough Play' celebrating the seasonal resumption of agriculture early in the new

year.³¹ In activities like this, dramatic performance became an arena of interaction between monarch and people. But the court also supported various kinds of drama of its own, entertainment that might also engage dynamically in the processes of politics and power centring on the monarch.

One of the most popular court recreations, which may not immediately sound dramatic, was the joust and tournament. Kings and nobles all enjoyed battle sports, and by the early sixteenth century these had acquired a highly theatrical dimension: the vivid spectacle of armed knights might be embedded into romance narratives and accompanied by indoor dance and shows. The tournament became a spectacular means of demonstrating prowess and prestige, of confirming and publishing the monarch's fitness for rule.³² Sir David Lyndsay's nostalgic reminiscence of James IV explicitly links this kind of performance with effective kingship:

Triumphand tournayis, justing and knightly game
With all pastyme according to ane king.
He wes the glore of princelie governing.³³

Tournament could have an international dimension, establishing king and nation as magnificent players on the European stage. Most famously, James IV in 1507-8 staged the 'Tournament of the Black Lady'.³⁴ Invitations were sent to knights in France, England and Denmark, calling them to Edinburgh to joust for the Black Lady in the Field of Remembrance, before the Tree of Esperance in the Garden of Patience. The Black Lady, possibly Moorish but more probably costumed as black in 'sleffis and gluffis [...] of blak seymys [chamois] leder', was magnificently dressed and carried in a decorated 'chair triumphale' to judge the proceedings.³⁵ The following

banquet was entertained with elaborate ‘play and dans’ and, according to one historian, the Black Lady herself was swept up to the roof of the hall in a cloud machine. This tournament proclaimed, not just to Scotland but the wider world, the magnificent glory of James’ reign so that, as Lyndsay pointed out, ‘of his court, through Europe sprang the fame’. Such theatrical performance was not just entertainment, but a means of asserting Scotland’s confidence and status as a nation in Europe.

Similarly elaborate spectacle accompanied many major dynastic events of Scotland’s monarchy. Baptismal celebrations were especially marked, asserting as they did the security of succession. The splendour of the baptism of the future James VI in 1566, including a spectacular firework festival built around an assault on a castle, was used by Mary Queen of Scots to reinforce her triumph over the childless Elizabeth I in giving birth to an heir.³⁶ This assertion to England of the security of the Scottish line was repeated thirty years later: the account of the spectacular theatrical celebrations for the baptism of Prince Henry (1594) was published in London as well as Edinburgh.³⁷ Its record of the cautious decision to withdraw the inclusion of a real lion may well have influenced Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

Apart from such significant occasions, the court enjoyed regular smaller-scale performances. Monarchs were often participants as well as spectators: James IV, James V, and Mary Queen of Scots all took part in mummings, masks and disguisings which involved dance, costume and sometimes concealment, or mock concealment of their own identities. Mary and her ladies were said on at least one occasion to have masqued ‘all cled in mens apperrell’, while her son James VI wrote and performed in

a wedding masque for one of his favourites in 1588.³⁸ Similar entertainments might be used to address the monarch. One of James VI's court poets, Alexander Montgomerie, wrote speeches for disguisings in which lavishly costumed visitors from exotic lands entered to honour the king or challenge courtiers to jousts or dance. 'The Navigatioun' reports the long adventurous journey of visitors 'From Turkie, Egypt, and from Arabie' to Scotland to honour James's accession to adult rule, and offer dramatised counsel to the young king.³⁹ Shows of this kind created a performance space in which monarchs could engage with their own nobles and courtiers. But even apparently slight dramatic occasions might be used to make diplomatic points: Mary was careful to ensure that Elizabeth I was sent the text of a banqueting masque which celebrated enduring and eternal love between the Scottish and English queens.⁴⁰

It is not surprising that most of the – very few – surviving texts of early Scottish drama belong in one way or another to courtly traditions. Court patronage was more likely to result in written script and in publication. In most cases the published texts seem offered primarily for reading; but, like drama, the act of performance itself was a fluid category at this period: many texts recorded as poetry for reading nonetheless show strong elements of potential or actual performance. Poems like the vividly abusive 'flytings' of Dunbar and Lyndsay, poems that are chiefly in dialogue like Henryson's comic pastoral 'Robene and Makyne' or John Burel's elaborate 'Pamphilus, spekand of luf', poems composed to dance tunes like those of Alexander Scott, may all testify to a culture of 'performance poetry' that overlaps formal drama.

The earliest surviving fully-fledged plays known to have been written by a Scot are the Latin tragedies of George Buchanan (1506-82). Buchanan, renowned through Europe as a humanist scholar, spent the largest part of his early career working in France.⁴¹ Both there and in Scotland he was patronised by the royal courts. While teaching at the College in Bordeaux in the early 1540s Buchanan translated two of Euripides' tragedies from Greek to Latin, and composed two plays of his own in classical style, but on biblical topics: *John the Baptist* and the *Old Testament Jephtha*. Buchanan gained an international reputation for these two tragedies, becoming a key figure in introducing the richness of classical Greek drama to sixteenth century Europe. He was especially praised for the *Jephthes* as following '*Aristotles preceptes and Euripedes examples*', while the English poet Sir Philip Sidney claimed 'the tragedies of Buchanan do justly bring forth a divine admiration'.⁴² Buchanan initially wrote his plays for his pupils to perform, and the distinguished French writer Michel de Montaigne who was a pupil at the College later recalled taking on 'principal parts' in the tragedies. But their reputation spread primarily as reading texts, through international educated and humanist circles. Their influence on the traditions of performed drama in Scotland was slight.

Jephthes is an impressive example of the adaptation of Greek tragedy to Renaissance interests. The play dramatises the dilemma of Jephtha who in gratitude for victory rashly vowed to God to sacrifice the first thing he met on his return home from war. Met by his only daughter, he is forced to weigh his vow to God against his human love for his child and family. This action raises a complex and profound moral problem, but set within an intensely emotional human situation. Like his classical models, Buchanan dramatises the agony of an irresolvable dilemma as

Jephtha struggles to respond to the competing demands on his honour, sacred duty and paternal love. His final decision to complete the sacrifice provides an emotional, but not an ethical catharsis, as the fraught debates with other characters ensure the moral problems remain unresolved. Powerfully as the play shapes its central topic, it remains a text designed primarily for readers. It shows little awareness of audience or action, creating its effects through words and formal rhetorical debate rather than through performance. It was enormously valuable and influential for educated readers across Europe, but its theatrical influence was primarily on the French neo-classical drama of the seventeenth century – Corneille and Racine – rather than on any active tradition of Scottish drama.

A play more clearly designed for Scottish court performance is the anonymous *Philotus*, although its first edition (1603) seems also to have been published for readers, describing it as ‘Ane verie excellent and delectabill Treatise’.⁴³ It is a lively Scots example of the Italianate Renaissance comedy developed from the drama of Plautus and Terence. Based around traditional characters of foolish old men, passionate young lovers and comic servants, and playing with love intrigues, mistaken identity and confusions, the play shows a real familiarity both with the elite Italian comedy of the Renaissance and with the vernacular immediacy of Scottish performance traditions. Its plot involves the outwitting of a lustful old man attempting to marry a young girl, by means of identical twins, mistaken identity and cross-dressing – in both gender directions. Its dialogue in vivid vernacular Scots moves with ease between the poised rhetorical allusiveness of high comedy and the colloquial earthiness of informal comic monologue. The playwright deals deftly with the complicated plotting around the cross-dressed twins, moving towards harmonious

resolution and the moral self-realisation of the aged Philotus. But the play is equally able to exploit the motifs of popular comedy, as the disguised wife beats and humiliates ‘her’ ancient husband, while the comic servant, the Plesant, acts as outspoken and mocking interpreter between the aristocratic lovers and the audience. We do not know when, by, or for whom this play was written – it has been persuasively argued to address either the court of Mary Queen of Scots in 1560s or of James VI in 1580s.⁴⁴ But its survival attests to the Scottish court’s knowledgeable engagement with both elite and popular, both European and local, traditions of theatre.

The latest surviving play-texts of the period, Sir William Alexander’s *Monarchicke Tragedies*, reflect the causes of decline of Scottish court theatre. Written for reading rather than performance, in heightened neo-classical style, Alexander’s first tragedy, *Darius*, was published just before he moved to London with James VI in 1603. He was already distancing himself from Scottish traditions, preferring ‘the English phrase’ to Scots ‘for the elegance and perfection thereof’. His remaining tragedies are increasingly anglicised as he became both politically and culturally hostile to Scotland. The removal of the court and anglicising of its culture which Alexander exemplifies are key influences in Scottish drama’s failure to thrive in the seventeenth century.

Drama and Politics

The theatrical activity of church, city and court all carried political potential, and as we have seen might express or inflect political relationships. Royal entries addressed and advised the monarch: an angel who welcomed Mary of Guise to St Andrews

offered ‘instructioun quhilk techit hir to serve her god, obey hir husband, and keep hir body clene’; while Mary Queen of Scots, a Roman Catholic queen, was deliberately challenged to accept images of Protestant faith.⁴⁵ Popular drama, too, might be used politically: a notorious uproar in Edinburgh in 1562 was claimed to be caused by those who ‘under colour of Robene Hudis play purpoissis to rais seditione and tumult’.⁴⁶ But in the mid-sixteenth century we find a more deliberate use of drama to engage with current politics, in particular the developing contentions of the Reformation. Drama is a potent political tool which, especially in a world with relatively few communication media, could promote ideas and debate, energise communities, attack institutions from a safely fictional arena, and employ humour and spectacle, ridicule and emotion to engage spectators in public affairs.

From the 1530s there is increasing evidence of openly political drama. Interestingly, recorded plays almost all support Reformist ideas.⁴⁷ In spite of later Presbyterian suspicion of theatre, for many decades the Protestant Reformation happily used drama’s power to challenge the status quo and spread new thinking. In 1535 we hear of a Friar Kyllour who presented a drama on the Passion at Stirling, comparing Roman Catholic bishops and priests to the Pharisees who encouraged the crucifixion.⁴⁸ A few years later James Wedderburn produced plays on John the Baptist and the tyrant Dionysius in Dundee, using their stories of oppression to attack ‘the abusses and corruptiouns of the Papists’.⁴⁹ Such plays carried an edge of real danger: both authors later suffered, Kyllour being executed and Wedderburn taking refuge in France. George Buchanan was in Scotland around this time and his *Baptistes* tragedy, written shortly afterwards, explores similar issues of religious reform oppressed by tyranny. Political drama remained a forceful, though less

perilous Protestant tool after the Reformation of 1560. In 1571 John Knox himself attended a play which dramatised the current siege of Edinburgh Castle by the Protestant faction, ‘according to Mr Knox doctrin’.⁵⁰ Drama could both promote and reinforce political change.

The court was another arena for political theatre. It seems that, as in England, a tradition of courtly interlude drama developed which might engage with topical affairs. A fascinating account survives of an interlude played in 1540 in Linlithgow before James V and his queen with ‘the hoole counsaile, spirituall and temporall’.⁵¹ This drama was clearly felt to have serious political implications: the report was eventually passed to Henry VIII’s ministers in London, as evidence of James V’s attitude to church reform. The eyewitness account of the play intriguingly confirms the powerful political use to which such court drama might be put. The action involved a Poor Man who came to complain to a King and parliament about the corruption and oppression of courtiers, and especially of the Church. The dialogue sounds forceful, comic but explicit and critical, directly engaging its audience; from its content and style it seems likely to be an early version of Sir David Lyndsay’s *Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis*. Most strikingly, James V apparently made deliberate use of the play in his political relations with the Church. He is reported after the performance to have demanded his bishops make the reforms the play called for, threatening them with his uncle Henry VIII if they refused. This is a powerful example of courtly use of drama, apparently by the monarch himself, to intervene in the political affairs of the nation.

Our understanding of early Scottish political drama is greatly enhanced by the one surviving pre-Reformation play-text, Lyndsay's *Thrie Estaitis*. This is a powerfully poised, inventive and theatrically confident play, testifying to an experienced author and a strongly developed tradition. If, as seems likely, Lyndsay based it on the 1540 interlude, it also demonstrates tellingly how political drama could be adapted from intimately addressing the closed, elite chamber of the centre of power, to spectacular all-day outdoor event, performed for not only the Queen Regent and nobility, but 'ane exceding greit nowmer of pepill'. It is a 'state of the nation' play which addresses issues of profound political and religious importance to the realm of Scotland, yet also a play of humour, popular and colloquial entertainment: as Lyndsay's first editor says, 'seriousnes intermixit with jocunditie'.⁵²

Lyndsay was exceptionally placed as a dramatist.⁵³ Serving and advising James V from the king's infancy, he was a long-experienced courtier and diplomat, becoming Scotland's chief herald, the Lyon King of Arms. He was widely recognised for his incisive and humane poetry, and from his early days was involved in court drama, and later the organisation of spectacular pageantry to welcome the king's French brides. He was thus actively involved in Scotland's national and international politics, but was valued in his own lifetime and beyond as a writer who could forcefully address the concerns of ordinary people. Evidence suggests there were two public performances of the *Thrie Estaitis*, one at Cupar, Lyndsay's home territory, in 1552, and another, more famous, on Edinburgh's Greenside playfield in 1554.

The play is very substantial, falling into two halves, with extra material and comic episodes before, between and after the main action.⁵⁴ The Edinburgh

performance was said to last from nine in the morning until seven in the evening, making it an all-day, enveloping performance experience. It is an allegorical drama, in which many of the characters represent personified ideas or groups, yet with a vivid concrete immediacy that rejects any idea of intellectual abstraction. The first half traces the development of the inexperienced and youthful King Humanitie, who is encouraged by his irresponsible young companions into a passionate affair with Lady Sensuality that distracts him from his kingly responsibilities and allows his rule to be overtaken by forces of Falsehood, Flattery and Deceit. Disguised as Churchmen, these Vices bar Good Counsel, Verity and Chastity from the King, enriching themselves as the realm sinks into disorder. Finally Divine Correction is sent from God to bring the young King to his senses, instructing him to call a Parliament of the Three Estates to right the wrongs of the realm. The second half then moves from the individual ruler to the public sphere of Scotland in which the audience themselves live. The Three Estates – the Clergy, Nobility and Burgesses – make a dramatically comic entrance, showing their incompetence by ceremonially processing backwards to the parliament, led by the Vices. John the Commonweal, a figure for the wellbeing of the nation as a whole, emerges from the audience to complain with fierce colloquial intensity to the parliament about the misgovernment of Scotland, especially the corruption in the church and the oppression of the poor. When the Clergy haughtily reject John's allegations, while revealing their own ignorance, sensuality and callousness, they are eventually stripped of their Church vestments, revealing the costumes of fools, and banished the realm. The parliament then passes a series of reforming resolutions, the Vices are hanged or banished, and the play ends with an ironic mock-sermon given by Folly.

The *Thrie Estaitis* engages openly with tense and crucial political issues of the day, making its performance to such a socially wide audience especially striking. The Edinburgh performance in August 1554, financed by the burgh council, followed soon after the accession of Mary Queen of Scots' mother as Regent in April. Mary of Guise was a committed Roman Catholic yet she seems, like her husband James V, to have been ready to listen to discussions of the reform of abuses in the Church. The play outspokenly advocates Church reform, although its concern is not with matters of theology or faith, but with the Clergy's failure in their roles as teachers, moral examples and charitable supporters of the people. Less explicitly, but still strongly, the *Thrie Estaitis* offers a view of Scotland's problems with kingly rule. King Humanitie is young and uncertain, and it has been pointed out that the play abounds in alternative king figures: at one extreme Divine Correction, and God himself, at the other the Poor Man who audaciously climbs into the King's empty throne during the interval of the play.⁵⁵ John the Commonweal frequently points out what he would do 'war I ane king'. At the time of these performances Scotland's monarch Mary was a young girl, living in France: the problems of governing harmoniously a nation without a strong, male, adult ruler are theatrically enacted before the people, the three estates and the new Queen Regent in the audience.

The *Thrie Estaitis* has a vibrant theatrical style which allows it to move dynamically between allegory and realism, outspoken physical humour and impassioned seriousness. Its vernacular Scots can express fluently its angry compassion for the poor and powerless, the bawdy colloquialism of arse-kissing farce, virtuoso satirical wordplay and comic routines of the courtly vices, and the formal rhetoric of Parliament and preacher. But beyond its verbal eloquence, it is a play with

a strong and sophisticated sense of performance and many of its points are made through theatrical rather than primarily verbal means. It exploits the special effects of costume vividly. The Vices comically disguise themselves in the clothes of churchmen, their concealment visually expressing the King's dangerous lack of moral and political insight. The Parliament's final recognition of its central responsibility to the good of the nation is dramatised as 'thay claith Johne the Common-weil gorgeouslie and set him doun amang them'. Theatricality sharpens the implications of the allegory. The audience is presented with a parallel between two equally beautiful women, Sensuality and Chastity, making the King's false choice of Sensuality both more understandable and less justifiable. The problem of sexuality and its control is comically intensified when the wives of the craftsmen are enraged with jealousy by their husbands' entertainment of the beautiful Lady Chastity. Lyndsay uses song, music and spectacle, and extensive direct address to the spectators, blurring the distinction between play and audience, and emphatically including them in its theatrical analysis of the state of Scotland.

Reformation and after

The Reformation is often seen as marking the 'beginning of the end' for traditions of Scottish drama. Yet the apparent lessening in theatrical activity in the decades following 1560 has far more complicated roots and causes. As we have seen, until the late sixteenth century drama in Scotland, as in England, was not a separate strand of cultural activity but was embedded in the institutions and needs of church, burgh and court. Changes in all of these organisations gradually affected the practices of theatre.

The reorganisation of the Scottish Church in the years following the Reformation changed forms both of worship and of social exchange. The liturgy of the Roman Catholic church with its vestments, processions, candles, incense and bells was firmly rejected; but although it was replaced with ceremonies that appear far simpler and less spectacular, the new rituals of communion and repentance were far from un-theatrical.⁵⁶ Further-reaching in its effect on drama is the Reformed Church's repression of the traditional occasions for theatrical activity. Church festivals and saints days were banned, guild altars removed, and the festive holidays of Yule, Candlemas and Pasch forbidden. Local presbyteries opposed the processions and pageants, Robin Hood plays and guising games that had marked these occasions, not so much because they were theatrical but because they were associated with 'superstitious' Roman Catholic festivals and practices. In fact, recent work confirms that the Reformed Church was not only less than successful in banning popular theatrical activity, but relatively lenient in its prosecution of those continuing to take part in it, for many decades after 1560.⁵⁷ Aberdeen was still reproaching parishioners for parading the streets 'maskit and dansing with bellis' at weddings and Yule in 1605, Kelso for taking part in May and Robin Hood plays in 1611, and Perth for Yuletide guising in 1634.⁵⁸ But anxieties were focused more on the 'superstitious time' and the threat to public order than on theatricality itself, and it seems that informal festive performance persisted well into the seventeenth century and beyond. The Church continued to permit less superstitious forms of drama, especially in schools. St Andrews even gave permission in 1574 for a 'comede [...] of the forlorn [prodigal] sone' to be played on a Sunday, provided it did not interfere with preaching, and although the Kirk objected both to biblical plays and to Sunday performances, it agreed that non-scriptural plays could continue, provided they were

first vetted.⁵⁹ Drama continued to be supported, even prescribed in educational settings right through the seventeenth century.

Burgh councils co-operated with Kirk restrictions, but continued to organise dramatic festivity for political and secular events, from the lavish celebrations for the entry of James VI's bride Anna of Denmark in 1590, to the pageantry for the visits to Scotland of James in 1617 and Charles I in 1633. Following James VI's majority, the royal court itself remained an active arena for theatre through until the end of the sixteenth century. In fact it was James's removal to London in 1603, on the death of Elizabeth I, that was probably the most significant single event in the decline of Scottish drama. This not only ended dramatic entertainment at the court itself, but also inhibited the potential development of a new, more independent theatrical tradition in Scotland.

In England, although traditional modes of drama had also begun to decline, the 1570s saw the flowering of commercial theatre: public playhouses were founded and play-going became established as a flourishing leisure pursuit. The political and religious situation in Scotland had not encouraged similar developments. But James VI showed interest in this new English drama and in 1599 was instrumental in enabling a company of English players to set up a playhouse and perform publicly in Edinburgh. The King quashed vocal opposition from the Kirk, insisting that they withdraw their prohibition on attending the plays, and facilitating a further tour by the players in 1601.⁶⁰ Continuing royal patronage and support might perhaps have fostered the gradual establishment of public theatre in Scotland. But James's

departure for London two years later left commercial players without a patron powerful enough to promote their cause.

The first half of the seventeenth century did therefore see significantly reduced theatrical activity in some areas, without new developments in drama to carry the tradition forward. The gradually intensifying conflicts of the mid-century, leading to Scotland's violent involvement in the Wars of the Three Kingdoms, reinforced an environment practically and economically antagonistic to drama. English theatre suffered similar setbacks: the lead up to civil war resulted in the closure of the playhouses in 1642, with an edict that 'public stage plays shall cease and be forborne'. By the time Cromwell invaded Scotland in 1650, drama in both countries was to some degree in suspension. The lively theatrical activity of pre-Reformation Scotland demonstrates how ideologically weighted public performance had always been. While theatrical impulses and activities never disappeared, the complex political and religious tensions in Scotland in the mid-seventeenth century unsettled the ideological context, and continued to make public dramatic performance problematic for several decades to come.

NOTES

¹ The title quotation refers to the preparations to be made for the visit of James V to Aberdeen in 1526. See Anna J Mill, *Mediaeval Plays in Scotland* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1927), p.159. Mill collects almost all the evidence for early drama in Scotland.

² For definitions see *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue* (<http://www.dsl.ac.uk/dsl/>).

³ John J McGavin, *Theatricality and Narrative in Medieval and Early Modern Scotland* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), p.3

⁴ Margo Todd, *The Culture of Protestantism in Early Modern Scotland* (Yale University Press, 2002), p.147

⁵ John Knox, *The Works of John Knox*, ed. David Laing, 6 vols. (Edinburgh: Wodrow Society, 1846-64), Vol. 3, pp. 66-7

⁶ John Knox, *History of the Reformation in Scotland*, ed William Croft Dickinson, 2 vols (London: Nelson, 1949), Vol. 1, p. 259

⁷ Mill, p. 116

⁸ Mill, p. 120

⁹ Mill, pp. 271-2

¹⁰ Mill, pp. 225-7

¹¹ Mill, pp. 173, 261

¹² Mill, pp. 115-7.

¹³ *Ratis Raving and Other Early Scots Poems on Morals*, ed. Ritchie Girvan (Edinburgh: Scottish Text Society, 1939), p. 83; Knox, *History*, Vol. 1, p. 138

¹⁴ For discussion of this in an English context see Mervyn James, 'Ritual, Drama and the Social Body in the Late Medieval English Town', *Past and Present* 98 (1983), pp. 3-29.

¹⁵ Mill, p. 123

¹⁶ Mill, p. 120; *Extracts from the Records of the Burgh of Edinburgh, A.D. 1403-1528*, ed. James D. Marwick (Edinburgh: Scottish Burgh Records Society, 1869), p. 122.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 31

¹⁸ Mill, p. 124

¹⁹ Mill, p. 351

²⁰ Mill, p. 150

²¹ Mill, p. 141

²² Mill, p. 220

²³ Mill, pp. 250-1

²⁴ Alexander Scott, *The Poems of Alexander Scott*, ed. James Cranstoun (Edinburgh: Scottish Text Society, 1896), p. 23

²⁵ Mill, p. 137

²⁶ *The Asloan Manuscript*, ed. William Craigie (Edinburgh: Scottish Text Society, 1923) p. 154, ll.138-43

²⁷ See Douglas Gray, 'The Royal Entry in Sixteenth Century Scotland' in *The Rose and the Thistle: Essays on the Culture of Late Medieval and Renaissance Scotland*, ed. Sally Mapstone and Juliette Wood (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 1998), pp. 10-37

²⁸ Mill, pp. 178-9

²⁹ Mill, pp. 192-4; see Michael Lynch, 'Court Ceremony and Ritual during the Personal Reign of James VI' in *The Reign of James VI*, ed. Julian Goodare and Michael Lynch (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 2000), pp. 74-8

³⁰ Mill, p. 130

³¹ See Helena M Shire and Kenneth Elliott, 'Pleugh Song and Plough Play', *Saltire Review* 2, no. 6 (1955), pp. 39-44

³² See Katie Stevenson, *Chivalry and Knighthood in Scotland, 1424-1513* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2006)

³³ David Lyndsay, *Selected Poems.*, ed. Janet Hadley Williams (Glasgow: Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2000) p. 75, ll. 502-4

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- ³⁴ See Louise Olga Fradenburg, *City, Marriage, Tournament : Arts of Rule in Late Medieval Scotland* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1991)
- ³⁵ Mill, pp. 325-8
- ³⁶ See Michael Lynch, 'Queen Mary's Triumph: The Baptismal Celebrations at Stirling in December 1566', *Scottish Historical Review* LXIX, no. 1 (1990), pp. 1-21
- ³⁷ Mill, pp. 50-1
- ³⁸ See Sarah Carpenter, 'Performing Diplomacies: The 1560s Court Entertainments of Mary Queen of Scots', *Scottish Historical Review* LXXXII, no. 2 (2003), pp. 194-225, at p. 217; *The Poems of James VI of Scotland*, ed. James Craigie, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Scottish Text Society, 1955), Vol 2, 134-45
- ³⁹ Alexander Montgomerie, *Poems*, ed. David John Parkinson, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Scottish Text Society, 2000) pp. 90-97
- ⁴⁰ Carpenter, 'Performing Diplomacies', pp. 212-4
- ⁴¹ See I. D. McFarlane, *Buchanan*, (London: Duckworth, 1981)
- ⁴² Ibid. p. 201; *George Buchanan Tragedies*, ed. Peter Sharratt, and P. G. Walsh (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1983)
- ⁴³ Text in *The Mercat Anthology of Early Scottish Literature, 1375-1707*, ed. R.D.S. Jack and P. A. T. Rozendaal (Edinburgh: Mercat Press, 1997)
- ⁴⁴ Jamie Reid-Baxter, 'Philotus: The Transmission of a Delectable Treatise', in *Literature, Letters and the Canaonical in Early Modern Scotland*, ed. Theo van Heijnsbergen and Nicola Royan (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 2002) pp. 52-68; R. D. S Jack, *The Italian Influence on Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1972), pp. 42-4
- ⁴⁵ Mill, pp. 287, 189-91
- ⁴⁶ Mill, p. 223
- ⁴⁷ See Sarah Carpenter, 'Drama and Politics: Scotland in the 1530s', *Medieval English Theatre* 10, no. 2 (1988), pp. 81-90
- ⁴⁸ Mill, p. 291
- ⁴⁹ Mill, p. 175
- ⁵⁰ Mill, p. 288
- ⁵¹ See *Medieval Drama: An Anthology*, ed. Greg Walker (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 538-40
- ⁵² *The Warkis of the Famous and Vorthie Knicht Schir David Lyndesay of the Mont* (Edinburgh: Henrie Charteris, 1568) + 4^v
- ⁵³ See Carol Edington, *Court and Culture in Renaissance Scotland: Sir David Lindsay of the Mount* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 1995)
- ⁵⁴ For full analysis see Greg Walker, *The Politics of Performance in Early Renaissance Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 117-162
- ⁵⁵ Ibid. pp. 141-2
- ⁵⁶ See Todd, *Culture of Protestantism*, pp. 84-126.
- ⁵⁷ Ibid. pp. 183-226
- ⁵⁸ Mill, pp. 163, 258-60, 283
- ⁵⁹ Mill, pp. 92-3
- ⁶⁰ Mill, pp. 300-306